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# conducting a realistic self-assessment with the Environment Rating Scales

by Thelma Harms

Having staff complete a self-assessment of their own early childhood program using a quality rating instrument is a well-established practice included in national early childhood accreditation programs as well as in state Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS). It is assumed that by conducting a self-assessment before the official assessment occurs, frontline staff will become aware of the requirements of the assessment instrument and be able to follow through with needed improvements in their classroom as they prepare for an official assessment. No doubt it is essential for the director and the early

childhood teaching staff or the family child care provider to become knowledgeable about the requirements of the assessment instrument that will be used to assess their program. However, in order for the self-assessment process to make a significant and appropriate contribution to the improvement of program quality, several factors need to be considered.

## Self-assessment vs. objective observation

First and foremost, we have to understand the different roles played by the self assessment and the official agency assessment. Self-assessment is primarily useful to help staff understand, plan for, and make as many improvements as they possibly can in the quality of their program in accordance with the official agency requirements. Since the director and staff have a deep emotional and philosophical commitment to what they are doing, it is very difficult for them to assume the role of objective observer. Therefore, only the scores from official agency assessments completed by objective observers who are free of conflicts of interest, and have been trained to a high level of accuracy in using the scales and whose reliability is checked periodically, should be used as evidence of program

quality level to fulfill the requirements for tiered reimbursement or other quality recognitions. If the sponsoring agency offering the quality improvement program wants to see how accurate the scores from self-assessments are, this can be done by selecting a sample of self-assessed programs, having these programs evaluated by a reliable observer, and comparing the results of both assessments for individual classrooms.

## Accurate use of the assessment instrument

Another challenge that must be met if self-assessment is to do any good, is that the assessment instrument itself must be used accurately by staff. The first thing staff needs to check is whether the most current spiral-bound version of the age-appropriate Environment Rating Scale is available for use in the self-assessment:

- The ECERS-R is used for group programs where the children are 2½ through 5 years of age (preschoolers and kindergartners).
- The ITERS-R is for groups of infants and toddlers, from birth to 30 months of age.
- The FCCERS-R is for family child care homes, both large and small, where children of different ages may be enrolled.



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H. E. Jones Child Study Center for 15 years. Since 1975 Thelma has been at the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Among her publications are the four *Environment Rating Scales*, *All About the ECERS-R* and *All About the ITERS-R*, the *Active Learning Curriculum* series, and the *Cook and Learn* series. All of Thelma's work owes much to her early practical experience as a family child care provider, a parent co-op director, and head teacher at the lab preschool at UC Berkeley. Thelma lectures and provides training throughout the U.S., Canada, Europe, and Asia, along with her work on scales-related projects at the FPG Child Development Institute. More information on Dr. Harms's work can be found on her web site, [www.fpg.unc.edu/~ecers](http://www.fpg.unc.edu/~ecers).

The authors of the Environment Rating Scales have written resource books that give detailed explanations in words and photographs to help illustrate the many different ways that each requirement in the scales can be met. Currently, *All About ECERS-R* (Cryer, Harms, & Riley, 2003) and *All About ITERS-R* (Cryer, Harms, & Riley, 2004) are available, and *All About the FCCERS-R* is being developed. These resource books are very helpful as staff try to learn to use the instruments accurately. It is also advisable to access our web site (see Resources) to see whether additional notes for any of the scales or other supplementary materials are available. The authors continue to post new materials to add helpful information for scale users. In addition, questions can be submitted at any time to our web site for us to answer.

**The need for training.** Most important for accuracy of self-assessment is recognizing that it takes considerable training on the specific requirements of the scale in order for classroom staff to produce a valid picture of the ongoing quality in the program. When completing an assessment with one of the Environment Rating Scales, not only will the staff members have to evaluate the indoor and outdoor space, the room arrangement, the materials and activities accessible for learning, and the health and safety practices, but also their teaching practices, and, most challenging, the quality of their interactions with the children, parents, and other staff members. Accurate self-assessment is a difficult task.

Currently a number of programs require self-assessments as a first step in establishing a Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), before requiring a formal, official assessment based on an observation of classroom practices by observers who are trained to reliability. However, if self-assessment is to be effective at all, training

on the instrument being used should be required, before staff conduct a self-assessment.

Preparatory training is so important that affordable, easily accessible courses should be offered and course credit or continuing education units (CEUs) should be given to those who complete such a course. To be most effective, locally available courses provided through Child Care Resource and Referral agencies (R&Rs) or community colleges should be given by professional early childhood educators who themselves have been trained on the Environment Rating Scales. The training for self-assessment needs to be of sufficient duration and intensity so that a working knowledge of the selected scale can be achieved.

Staff need time to absorb the new information they gain and to try doing an assessment in manageable steps. For example, instead of providing 8 hours of training all on one day, it is preferable to break an 8-hour course into 2-hour segments given on a weekly basis, each segment covering several subscales. This format gives the trainees time to try, in their own classrooms, the segment of the scale they have learned. When they return the following week they can ask questions based on their experience, before being trained on a new segment of the scale.

Support from a 'buddy,' another staff member participating in the course, also helps in both the learning and application processes. If possible, several staff members working in the same room should take the course together as a team. Then, if each one conducts an independent assessment on the segment they learned that week, the team can meet to compare and discuss their results before the next class meeting. This approach builds competence in using the scale and stimulates ideas for classroom changes.

It is also helpful to get an 'outsider's' assessment by a person well-trained on the scale, to compare with the staff self-assessment. Mentoring programs, technical assistance providers from Resource and Referral agencies, and state agency staff working for Quality Rating and Improvement Systems are available in some communities to conduct an assessment as part of preparation for the official assessment.

If possible, the 'outsider's' assessment and the staff self-assessment should be done at relatively the same time, so that they can be compared and discussed within a common context. Having a copy of the appropriate "All About" book available for reference during such comparisons helps to increase knowledge of the scale requirements and improve scoring accuracy.

## Conclusion

The main value of self-assessment is to increase awareness of the actual environment and practices in one's own classroom. The assessment must, therefore, present a realistic picture of what the children are experiencing on a daily basis. Significant changes will be possible only if the staff have had sufficient training to produce accurate scores, the personal resilience to face the challenges of working towards improved quality, and the support of the administration and the community. It is important for all stakeholders, the early childhood program directors and frontline staff, the official quality rating program, as well as parents and the public to realize that, although many significant changes can be made in the short term, long-range goals will also be needed. An accurate self-assessment will help early childhood program directors and staff distinguish between the short- and long-range improvements needed, and to plan effectively for both.

## Resources

Environment Rating Scales:

[www.fpg.unc.edu/~ecers](http://www.fpg.unc.edu/~ecers)

For Further Information

Cryer, D., Harms, T., & Riley, C. (2004).

*All About the ITERS-R*. Lewisville, NC:

Kaplan PACT House Publishing.

Cryer, D., Harms, T., & Riley, C. (2003).

*All About the ECERS-R*. Lewisville, NC:

Kaplan PACT House Publishing.